

The Gothic in the Neo-Slave Narrative

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and
German Language and Literature

Ana Kvesić

The Gothic in the Neo-Slave Narrative

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2021

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Gotički motivi u novim pripovijestima o ropstvu

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the Gothic elements in Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987). It argues that the main character, Beloved, is the embodiment of the Gothic elements in the novel. In order to justify this claim, the paper first provides an explanation of the Gothic genre and its main features along with a definition of the term neo-slave narrative and its connection to the Gothic. The analysis of the novel consists of three parts, each dedicated to Beloved's different levels of power. Her first and lowest level is her ghost form, when she is only haunting house 124 and causing commotion to her mother, Sethe, and sister, Denver, who live there. The second level is her transformation to human form, which is triggered by her mother's attempt at finding happiness and moving on from Beloved's death. At this stage Beloved is adjusting to the life on Earth and testing the abilities of her powers. The last level analyzed in the paper concerns the height of Beloved's power, but also her demise. Beloved starts to feed off her mother's life force, which makes her an incredibly powerful being, until she is stopped by Denver and a group of local women from the community, who perform an exorcism that banishes her forever from Cincinnati.

Keywords: *Beloved*, Toni Morrison, the Gothic, neo-slave narrative, slavery, the supernatural

Introduction

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer award-winning novel *Beloved* (1987) is one of the prime examples of neo-slave narrative, which tells a story about hardships of African American slaves. In order to illustrate the trauma innocent people were put through, Morrison utilizes elements of the Gothic genre, which this paper will be focusing on. An explanation of the Gothic and the neo-slave narrative genres will be provided. The central focus of the research will be on the main character, Beloved, who embodies the elements of the Gothic in the novel. She first appears as a ghost that haunts house 124, where her mother, Sethe, and sister, Denver, live. When her mother tries to move on with her life for the first time after her death, Beloved's transformation is triggered, and she appears in a human form, whose only task is to drain Sethe's vitality. As Sethe grows weaker, Beloved's powers tremendously increase. When Sethe is driven to the brink of existence, Denver decides to ask for help from local women to get rid of Beloved. The women of the community gather around 124, where they perform an exorcism and banish Beloved forever from Cincinnati.

The first chapter of this paper presents Toni Morrison's short biography and a summary of *Beloved*. The second chapter explains and exemplifies the features of the Gothic and the neo-slave narrative genres, which will be applied to the analysis of the novel itself in the third chapter, which is divided into three sections. The first section analyzes Beloved as a ghost. The second section discusses Beloved in her human form. The third and last section provides an analysis of Beloved's banishment from Sethe's life.

1. Toni Morrison and *Beloved*

Chloe Anthony Wofford, or better known as Toni Morrison, was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio (Bloom 203). From an early age, she loved reading and listening to stories from her father about African American tradition, which inspired some of her works later in life (NobelPrize.org). She went on to study English at Howard University, getting her B.A. in 1953 (Bloom 203). In 1955, she graduated from Cornell University with her M.A. thesis on the theme of suicide in William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf (Bloom 203). She worked as an English instructor from 1955 to 1964 at Texas Southern University and Howard University (Bloom 203). In 1970, she published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and just a year later, she became an associate professor of English at the State University of New York (Bloom 203). In 1975, her book *Sula* was nominated for the National Book Award (Bloom 204). She published *Song of Solomon* and won National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1977 (Bloom 204). Just a year after *Beloved's* publication, in 1988, she received the Pulitzer Prize in fiction and the Robert F. Kennedy Award for it (Bloom 204). For her incredible contributions to literature, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. She continued to publish works with her son Slade, their first collaboration being in 1999 on a children's book called *The Big Box* (Bloom 204). Morrison's texts were often described as depictions of "difficult circumstances and the dark side of humanity, but [they] still convey integrity and redemption. The way she reveals the stories of individual lives conveys insight into, understanding of, and empathy for her characters" (NobelPrize.org). Toni Morrison passed away on August 5, 2019, leaving behind her magna opera, which impacted a wide audience of people and which will be read for many generations to come.

Beloved is one of Morrison's most praised and famous works. She dedicated the book to "sixty million and more," which is "the best educated guess at the number of black Africans who never even made it into slavery—those who died as captives in Africa or on slave ships" (qtd. in Mandel 582). Morrison described it "as a novel 'about something the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember'" (qtd. in Mandel 584). She added that "There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300 foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit" (qtd. in Mandel 585). This lack only further attests to the

fact that the harrowing history of African Americans has been stifled, so Morrison wanted her novel to be used as a memorial to honor those who were put through the inhumane torment and for their painful experience to never be forgotten.

The story is set in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe, a former slave, lives with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and daughter Denver. They live in a house that is haunted by the ghost of Sethe's baby, Beloved, which ultimately takes a human form and starts punishing Sethe emotionally and physically as a form of revenge for her unjust death. In the end, the community successfully works together to banish Beloved, who is never seen again. According to Lyles-Scott, *Beloved* is "More than just your average literary narrative" as it "works on many levels to achieve a balance as a slave chronicle and a story of the loves, suffering, and spirituality of three generations of black women, whose lives were devastated by the institution of slavery" (201).

2. The Gothic and the Neo-Slave Narrative

The Gothic genre first appeared in the Romantic era with Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which paved the way for other Gothic works. Gothic fiction is often described as "a writing of excess" (Botting 1) because of "the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism and the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence" (Botting 1). Some of the features that can be found in Gothic fiction are the Gothic atmosphere, the appearance of the supernatural force, the feeling of the sublime, the Gothic landscape, and the intense emotions that are provoked in the reader. The Gothic atmosphere is a gloomy and enigmatic ambience, indicating a troublesome visit from the past which provokes feelings of terror and laughter (Botting 1). The appearance of the supernatural force can be in the form of a supernatural character or event. A supernatural character is somebody defying the laws of nature and often a character connected to the underworld and something sinister, such as a ghost, a witch, or a vampire. A supernatural event is an inexplicable event that contradicts everything rational and the natural order of life, such as resurrections, magic rituals, or levitation. According to Bashirahishize, the supernatural is essentially an altered version of the evil and hidden human nature, which the Gothic fiction tries to unveil and bring to light (6). Therefore, intense emotions in readers are triggered, which "become[s] a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits" (Botting 5). The sublime is a literary concept which refers to something or somebody that is simultaneously enchanting and terrifying. This concept affects the reader in a contradictive way – "it chill[s] their blood, delight[s] their superstitious fancies, and [feeds] uncultivated appetites for marvellous and strange events" (Botting 3). In other words, the reader feels extremely frightened, but at the same time s/he is left in awe by the divine view in front of her/him. The Gothic landscapes are usually isolated and mysterious places like old castles, houses, cemeteries or abbeys, which are in a decaying condition with oftentimes secret rooms and labyrinths. The reason why Gothic fiction is set in such places is because this signals "the spatial and temporal separation of the past and its values from those of the present" (Botting 2). The rich history of these old places makes them feel almost alive; they carry stories and fears of their former owners inside their walls, which often come alive when the house is disturbed by new inhabitants.

The neo-slave narrative is a literary genre about slavery – a fictionalized account of slavery written by a person who has not directly experienced slavery and told from a contemporary point of view. The genre emerged after World War II, and it “references contemporary works that adopt the antebellum narrative of the enslaved to illuminate conceptions of race, as well as the importance of perspective and historiography” (Babb 218). Whereas the nineteenth-century slave narratives were focused on the incorrectness and the inhumanity of enslavement, the neo-slave narratives focus more on the systems that permitted slavery to happen in the first place (Babb 227). Neo-slave narratives do not sugarcoat any events or trauma that the people experienced; they capture the good and the bad days, the pain and pleasure, and also, the love and perversion (Babb 235). The goal of this genre is both to never forget the past and to improve the present because there are still injustices and brutalities happening around the world (Babb 235). A lot of enslaved people never got the opportunity to tell their story; therefore, so much important history has been forever lost. Yet, the authors of this genre force their readers to relive the history by submerging them in it (Anim-Addo and Lima 2). Morrison calls this approach “rememory” and defines it as “an active process of reconstitution that involves passing on the story in such a way that it becomes real, embodied, lived through the storyteller’s mediation” (qtd. in Babb 2). Anim-Addo and Lima suggest that neo-slave narratives will be written until justice or some kind of compensation is given to the African American community (6). The atrocities that the enslaved people endured over three centuries have left a permanent mark on countless generations, on a social, psychological, and economic level (Anim-Addo and Lima 6). The compensation they are seeking for is not of the monetary value but, rather, based on the support and further development of African American communities (Anim-Addo and Lima 6). Until such changes are made, the genre will continue to flourish and draw attention to the wrongdoings done to African Americans.

Throughout history, the African American community has many times been overlooked and overshadowed, and the same pattern, unfortunately, applies when it comes to literature. When people think of authors of Gothic fiction, they usually mention names like Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, or somebody more contemporary, like Stephen King. Maisha Wester detected this oversight and wrote a book dedicated to the African American authors of Gothic fiction titled *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*. She states that African American writers have contributed to the genre immensely by combining the traditions of Gothic fiction and transforming it into a vessel for the black community to

express the unfair treatments they have experienced as citizens of America (1). The African American Gothic goes beyond just reversing the roles of “blackened evil that torments and is defeated by good whiteness” (Wester 2); it disrupts “the entire notion of categories and boundaries” (Wester 2). African American writers of Gothic fiction also criticize “the identities white gothic writers imposed upon them” (Wester 2) and disclose “the archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered others as constructions useful in the production of white patriarchal dominance” (Wester 2). Wester suggests that the Gothic is not only a literary genre but also “a series of tropes and themes used to meditate upon a culture’s various anxieties, particularly through discourses of Otherness” (2), which is a great method for the African American community to express the hardships they were put through. The reason why the African American writers of Gothic fiction have been shunned is because they are viewed as a threat to society. Their creations are seen as a peril to a predominately white society because Gothic fiction possesses the power in which “the narrative fails to cohere and the (voice of the) Other threatens to break through and disrupt our seamless logocentric history to reveal its ever-present breaks and repressions” (Wester 4). The lack of popularity of black authors of this genre can be blamed on the dominant society, which only wants to stifle the reality of black people’s oppression. Luckily, there are authors who managed to rise above the discrimination and make an impact with their works, one of the prime examples being Toni Morrison.

3. Analysis

3.1. The Ghost

The novel begins with a strong opening sentence: “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (Morrison 3), which personifies the house, with the indication that an evil spirit with bad intentions realms in the space. The house has been terrorizing its residents for years, eventually chasing Sethe’s two sons away: “Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)” (Morrison 3).

Even after the boys left the house, the spirit continues to disrupt peace at 124: “Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (Morrison 4). Sethe and her daughter Denver understand “the source of the outrage” as well as “the source of light” (Morrison 4). Namely, the baby – Beloved’s ghost – is angry with Sethe because she got caught in the crossfire in Sethe’s fight for freedom. Before coming to 124, Sethe was a slave at a farm called Sweet Home. She worked there for many years, got married, and even had three of her children there: Howard, Buglar, and Beloved. But, when an opportunity arose to send her children to Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, she took it. Sending her children away to freedom only gave her the extra strength she needed to escape herself, even though she was pregnant with Denver at the time. She left Sweet Home barefoot without food or water and walked to Cincinnati to 124. On the road, she met a white girl, Amy, who helped her give birth to Denver and survive the dangerous journey. Eventually, Sethe makes it to 124 and lives there happily in peace with her children for twenty-eight days, until her owner finds them and wants to bring them all back to Sweet Home. Sethe will not allow that to happen: “Oh, no. I wasn’t going back there. I don’t care who found who. Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead” (Morrison 42). She decides that the best thing she could do to save her children from a life of misery in slavery is to kill them. “Morrison does not justify Sethe’s action, but exposes ‘the dynamic that allowed a slave to kill rather than have her children remanded to slavery’” (Ghasemi 246). Furthermore, Sethe’s act is the ultimate proof of love she has for her children because she believes that even death is better than having to be a slave: “It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (Morrison 165). Unfortunately, in her attempt to keep her children safe, she kills

Beloved. Beloved never forgives Sethe for taking her life, and, in return, she starts haunting 124, where her anger and resent towards Sethe grow more every day.

Sethe sympathizes with Beloved's feelings of wrath and resentfulness, and she wishes they could have a conversation to resolve their issues (Van Den Akker 7). Finally, in an effort to make amends, Sethe and Denver decide "to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so" (Morrison 4). Unfortunately, the ghost does not want to talk to them. Like any loving mother, Sethe excuses such behavior because "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even" (Morrison 4). Furthermore, it is revealed that the spirit's main source of energy is Sethe's love: "'For a baby she throws a powerful spell,' said Denver. 'No more powerful than the way I loved her,' Sethe answered . . ." (Morrison 4). Mandel additionally explains that "Sethe's statement about the way she loved her baby, [is] an expression so potent that it rivals the ghost's persecution of the inhabitants of 124, that conjures up this moment of 'rememory'" (586). In this moment, the baby's energy is so strong that it triggers Sethe to remember the day when she laid her to rest. With this "rememory," Sethe is being tortured with feelings of guilt and regret: "She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral" (Morrison 5), which was the spirit's intention.

After some time, Paul D, a friend from Sweet Home, visits Sethe. The first thing he says when he enters the house is: "'Good God.' . . . 'What kind of evil you got in here?'" (Morrison 8). Sethe explains to him that the spirit he felt is her late daughter, Beloved, but that she is not evil. Moreover, Denver explains that she is "Lonely and rebuked" (Morrison 13). According to Bieber Lake, "Paul D's appearance is an immediate threat to the ghost because he represents the possibility of Sethe's healing from despair – her hope for movement, growth, change – in short, a new life" (56). Beloved feels intimidated by Paul D because he is a person that could help Sethe overcome and forget her death, and that is a risk Beloved cannot take, so when Sethe and Paul D share an intimate moment, the house starts shaking. Paul D orders the spirit to "Leave the place alone!" (Morrison 18), only further angering the ghost, which pushes a table onto him. Yet, Paul D is not afraid; he is ready to defend Sethe from any kind of threat: "You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!" (Morrison 18). The house stops shaking, and the presence is in the end successfully sent away. After that disturbing night, it is quiet and

peaceful at 124.

Denver feels sorrowful that her sister is gone, and she resents Paul D for chasing her away, because she felt joy in “the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more” (Morrison 37). She has a special connection with her sister, and she knows that Beloved would not give up so easily. Beloved foreshadowed her return by using the bond she has with Denver: “‘Well, I think the baby got plans,’ said Denver” (Morrison 37). Conveniently, the foreshadowing happened just when Sethe was ready to start trusting someone again. Beloved could not allow that to happen, so she makes Sethe feel guilt-ridden and insecure: “‘Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?’” (Morrison 38).

3.2. The Mysterious Woman – Beloved

After the banishing of Beloved’s spirit, Paul D stays at the house. He wants to make a life with Sethe: “But when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn’t the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life” (Morrison 46). Sethe feels unsure, but Paul D proposes that all three of them go to a carnival together as a family. Sethe accepts the offer; she is excited, and “this being her first social outing in eighteen years, she felt obliged to wear her one good dress, heavy as it was, and a hat” (Morrison 46). They are having fun at the carnival, just like a family, and even Denver is happy “enough to consider the possibility that Paul D wasn’t all that bad” (Morrison 48).

The three of them are returning home from the carnival, when they see a mysterious woman in front of the house. As soon as she sees her, Sethe’s bladder fills up. She excuses herself, but she cannot hold it anymore and goes to the backyard to relieve herself. This lack of control reminds her of child labor: “But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (Morrison 51). According to Van Den Akker, “Sethe, who focalizes here, connects her bodily reaction to giving birth, signaling that the girl is her daughter. The delivery like event is Sethe’s physical response to Beloved’s return, and is catalyzed by Beloved’s banishment from 124 and Sethe’s inability to continue to repress her traumatic memories” (8). In a similar vein, Tu contends that this mysterious woman could be Sethe’s late daughter, Beloved, due to the fact that even though the woman is an adult, she is behaving child-like:

Signifying physical immaturity and psychological ambivalence, this incarnation presents to readers with a shape and dressing of a woman, who is smiling, with “new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands,” (61) yet with the behavior of a baby who loves sweets, cannot walk, “holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it [is] too heavy for a neck alone” (Morrison 67). (128)

Also, the fact that she introduces herself as Beloved, a woman of the same age that Sethe’s late daughter would have been now, only further supports the argument. When Beloved starts living at 124, she asks Sethe about a pair of earrings. Sethe does not have them anymore, but when Beloved was just a baby, Sethe let her play with them. On another occasion, Beloved starts humming a lullaby that Sethe used to sing to her as a baby to put her to sleep. The lullaby is not a well-known one, because it is a melody that Sethe made up. These are all indicators to Sethe that this mysterious girl is really her daughter Beloved.

Despite Sethe’s happiness for her daughter’s return, Beloved does not appear to be a creature from this world. Before she came to 124, she emerged from a body of water, smiling and fully dressed in black, foreshadowing a presence of evil, darkness, and power. She has respiratory issues as if she were having trouble adjusting to breathing and being alive. Furthermore, Beloved is the embodiment of the element of the sublime. She is a beautiful, well dressed, young woman, but her eyes give away her true identity of a soulless entity: “It was that deep down in those big black eyes there was no expression at all” (Morrison 55). She is also referred to as a fear inducing individual: ““And that girl in her house scares me the most”” (Morrison 234). Goldner describes her as a being “of uncanny beauty, . . . as it provokes confusion that eventually borders on madness” (76), and Barnett even goes so far to introduce the idea that Beloved could be a vampire, a soulless creature defined as “a blood-sucking ghost or re-animated body of a dead person” (421). She supports her argument by stating that Beloved “metaphorically drains Sethe’s vitality” (Barnett 421).

In addition, Beloved is a master of manipulation. In the beginning, she pretends to be weak and frail, but simultaneously, she has the strength to pick up a rocking chair with one hand: ““Acts sick, sounds sick, but she don’t look sick. Good skin, bright eyes and strong as a bull.’ ‘She’s not strong. She can hardly walk without holding on to something.’ ‘That’s what I mean. Can’t walk, but I seen her pick up the rocker with one hand”” (Morrison 56). Beloved starts slowly showing the power she holds over Sethe. During a scene when Sethe reminisces

about Halle, while Denver and Beloved are watching her from the trees, she wishes she could feel his touch one more time: “Just the fingers, she thought. Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way” (Morrison 95). Suddenly, she feels fingers on the back of her neck “so light was the touch, childlike almost, more finger kiss than kneading” (Morrison 95), indicating that the childlike touch is probably that of Beloved. Yet, the grip on her neck starts to feel stronger and it begins choking her. Sethe “clawed at the hands that were not there. Her feet were thrashing by the time Denver got to her and then Beloved” (Morrison 95). When Beloved loses her focus on Sethe’s neck, by getting up with Denver, the choking stops. The bruises on Sethe’s neck appear immediately, and Beloved starts touching them: “Beloved’s fingers were heavenly. Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her” (Morrison 97). Beloved starts having more power over Sethe with each passing day, and “she and Beloved soon enter into a struggle for survival, ‘rationing their strength to fight each other’ (239) – a struggle that Beloved seems to win” (Barnett 421).

3.3. The Banishing of Beloved

The situation in the house starts getting worse; Beloved’s dominance rises, and Sethe’s wellbeing is diminishing: “Slowly, Sethe fades away under Beloved’s influence; she quits her job, starves herself for Beloved’s benefit, she serves her every whim, and explains her actions tirelessly” (Van Den Akker 10). Beloved’s emotional manipulation of Sethe is visible in such a high degree that even Denver notices it: “Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her” (Morrison 251). Beloved holds such power over Sethe that it is not necessary for Beloved to even talk, and Sethe starts justifying herself and apologizing for what she had done to her: “Whispering, muttering some justification, some bit of clarifying information to Beloved to explain what it had been like, and why, and how come. It was as though Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out” (Morrison 252). Beloved also continues to physically abuse Sethe: “. . . this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair” (Morrison 255). In these moments, “Beloved, in seeming madness, presents herself [as] a dramatic figure of the

devil. She carries insatiable desire for revenge on her mother when ‘Sethe spit up something she had not eaten,’ (286) which signifies ‘the way that Beloved has begun to possess [Sethe’s] body and soul’ (Peterson 56), and this ‘ate up her life’ (295)” (Tu 131-32).

Thankfully, Denver starts to see Beloved’s intentions and decides to take matters in her own hands: “Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either” (Morrison 252). Denver goes to see Mr. and Miss Bodwin, the people that helped Baby Suggs when she first came to Cincinnati, in the hopes that they could help her find a job. Before seeing the Bodwins, she talks first to Janey, the Bodwins’ maid. Janey knows that Sethe is not well and wants Denver to explain the situation to her. Denver tells her everything about Beloved: “Denver had explained the girl in her house who plagued her mother as a cousin come to visit, who got sick too and bothered them both. Janey seemed more interested in Sethe’s condition, and from what Denver told her it seemed the woman had lost her mind” (Morrison 254). Janey decides to help Denver and Sethe, so she spreads the word around town that “Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her [and that] Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled [by Beloved]” (Morrison 255).

The women in the community feel unsure about the situation at first, and “They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through” (Morrison 255). Ella is the woman that convinces the community that they should help Sethe because “When Ella heard 124 was occupied by something-or-other beating up on Sethe, it infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could very well be the devil himself against ‘the lowest yet’” (Morrison 256). Ella organizes a group of thirty other women from the community to come in front of the house so they can perform an exorcism together. The women “brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword” (Morrison 257). Even though some of the women are afraid, they are still willing to participate and show Sethe the love and respect of the community, proving that “evil, when perpetuated by a community motivated by fear, is also best defeated by a community motivated by the baptizing power of love” (Bieber Lake 77).

When the women arrive in front of the house, they immediately feel Beloved’s power.

The mere sight of the house triggers a memory of them when they were young: “When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves. Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep” (Morrison 258). However, the women do not let themselves be distracted; they start to sing prayers, drawing out Beloved and Sethe from the house. In comparison to Beloved, Sethe looks small, frail, and drained of life. Sethe’s poor physical appearance is all due to the abuse she endured and on which Beloved thrived; as Sethe’s soul and body diminish, Beloved’s vitality strengthens: “As Sethe grows so thin that the flesh between her forefinger and thumb fades, Beloved eats all the best food and grows a ‘basket-fat’ stomach (243). Beloved animates her ghostly flesh with food but also with Sethe’s life: ‘Beloved [eats] up [Sethe’s] life, [takes] it, swell[s] up with it, gr[ows] taller on it’” (Barnett 421).

In these moments, Beloved is at the height of her power, and everyone is aware of her superiority: “The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunder-black and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling” (Morrison 261). Sethe is standing beside her, but she sees a man passing by. She is still under Beloved’s spell and thinks that it is her owner coming to take her and her children back to Sweet Home, just like he did all those years ago. Sethe rushes into the crowd, wanting to kill him this time and not her children. The women of the community embrace her: “They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling” (Morrison 262). In those short few moments of the community showing love to Sethe, the spell she has been under breaks. Consequently, Beloved simply disappears, never being seen again.

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